

Gratitude and Grace
by Beverly Denver

These days, thoughts turn to blessings, giving thanks and family reunions. Understandable, perhaps, why I am feeling grateful but also wistfully nostalgic.

When I was a young girl, our family lived in a modest, ranch-style home in a small town in north Louisiana. Traveling to see aunts, uncles and distant cousins took days, not hours, so visits in November were rare.

As a result, Thanksgiving at our house was, most often, a small intimate gathering that included my parents, two younger sisters and me.

My mother (who worked five days a week outside the home) would start the cooking marathon the night before – baking pumpkin and pecan pies, preparing veggie casseroles and a favorite congealed salad of cranberries, sour cream and walnuts. By 10 o'clock, the kitchen was in shambles, and my mother was exhausted.

But still, there was much to do before bedtime.

Being the oldest, I would stay up late and tackle the cleanup. Always, I was amazed by the number of pots and pans and distraught by just how difficult it was to scrub them spotless. (In those pre-Teflon days, “women’s work” was challenging, but also tedious, tiresome and less than liberating.)

With me up to my elbows in soapsuds, Mother would venture into the dining room and retrieve fine china, etched crystal and silver flatware from their hiding places. Before long, she would add them to a lace tablecloth and cut flowers and transform our table's simple surface into an elegant holiday display.

With the exacting skill of a surgeon she would place the knives such so – followed by multiple forks and spoons, as well as bread, salad and dinner plates. Eventually, decorative linen napkins – tied around the stems of goblets – were positioned as carefully as tourniquets.

I don't remember Mother going to bed on those nights, but I suppose she must have at some point. What I do recall is awakening many a Thanksgiving morning to find her already back in the kitchen. As if magically transformed, she'd appear rested, refreshed and wearing new clothes.

I would watch with interest as she chopped celery and onions for the cornbread dressing and later watch skeptically as she stuffed the gooey mixture into both ends of the big bird.

Over the next few hours, I would see Mother open and close the oven door a dozen of times at least. I'd ask, "What are you dripping all over the turkey, Mommy?" She'd smile teasingly and say, "It's his tanning lotion, honey!"

(To this day, I cannot look at a roasted turkey without associating it with bottles of Coppertone.)

Two decades later, when I was expecting my second child, Thanksgiving festivities moved to Houston and the burden of browning the backsides of turkeys was delegated to me.

For years, being the caretaker of our family's traditions was a role I enjoyed and planned for weeks in advance! Doing things as Mother had done became my mantra!

But time changes circumstances, and eventually, it did its thing on our Bayou City gatherings.

The small family of five grew to 14, living in four households in three states. When the nieces and nephews became teens getting them away from athletics and social commitments became more and more difficult, and before we knew it, family gatherings in November were rare once more.

With the absence of family, it was friends and exchange students who started occupying the seats around my table. Time-honored culinary traditions were upheld, but international recipes were added. Conversations shifted from domestic folklore to global topics befitting a state dinner. The co-mingling of strange and familiar made the uniquely American holiday extraordinarily special.

But...time marches on and continues to change things. The alterations this season couldn't please me more!

As it turns out, Thanksgiving 2004 will be a Texas-based, not-to-be-missed extended family gathering. The clan will meet in Dallas, and my sister Gayle will play hostess.

Mother and Daddy, both of my sisters and our families, as well as blessed additions, will be there. We girls will do what we did so many years ago – help with the prep work; peek in on football games; take turns telling funny stories about each other.

But, when it comes time to gather around the table, the mood will become more solemn. With full and grateful hearts, we will join hands, bow our heads and, in unison, say grace.

For me, there is no Thanksgiving memory – whether it is with family or friends – more cherished than that.

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